NAS7.000774
NASA - JPL
SSIC No. 9661

STAR NEWS 11-12-89

4th carcinogen found in Arroyo Seco water

Cleanup might be $5.4 million

By JOHN FLECK
Staff Writer

PASADENA — The city has found a fourth cancer-causing chemical in a well in the Arroyo Seco, according to a memo distributed to directors this weekend.

The discovery adds a new twist to negotiations between Pasadena and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, one that probably will increase the cost of cleaning up the groundwater.

A joint JPL-city study concluded the "likely" source of contamination was effluent from JPL, although JPL officials disputed the certainty of that conclusion.

The well, shut down since 1985 because of contamination with other chemicals, found to be polluted with 1,2-Dichloroethane, or 1,2-DCA, at a level as much as twice that permitted for drinking water under state law.

Discovery of 1,2-DCA will add another $1.4 million to the cost of building a cleanup plant for the four city wells now closed because of pollution, raising the estimated total to as high as $5.4 million, according to the memo from Deputy City Manager Ed Aghjayan to the board.

The city and JPL have been negotiating for almost three years over the costs of cleanup. JPL paid nearly half the $165,000 cost for studies of the problem, but no agreement has been reached on funding the much higher price tag for stripping the cancer-causing solvents from the water.

They appeared to be close to agreement in July, when the board, at a closed session, gave tentative approval to what City Manager Don McIntyre characterized as "a verbal understanding" over terms of the cost.

But after four months final terms have not been completed.

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Cleanup: City, JPL negotiating 3 years

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and city Utility Advisory Commissioner Tim Brick said he was told last week by a participant that negotiations "were not going well."

Deputy City Manager Ed Aghjayan, head of the negotiations, would say only that they are continuing, and JPL Environmental Engineer Elizabeth Stetz said JPL officials "hope that they'll be resolved soon."

Those on the city side of the issue uniformly blame JPL for the pollution, which is found in an underground swath southeast of the NASA-funded home of the nation's unmanned space program.

A 1986 engineering study funded jointly by the city and JPL found that "the most likely source" of the pollution was JPL. In a carefully worded statement issued then, JPL acknowledged the study's results and admitted using cesspools, an incinerator and dumping pits near the east end of the laboratory to dispose of its waste in the 1940s and '50s.

But in an interview Friday, Stetz said JPL officials feel there is no conclusive evidence that the lab is responsible. "There hasn't been enough data collected today to know for sure," she said.

Brick, however, said the 1986 study and the fact there is no other business or industry in the area leave no other conclusion but that JPL caused the pollution.

"There's really only one candidate," he said. "All of the evidence points to previous activity, probably decades ago, by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory."

The stakes in the negotiations are high. Prior to the discovery of the 1.2-DCA, a city consultant estimated it would cost between $2.3 million and $4 million to build the plant and another $500,000 to $900,000 to operate it.

Discovery of the new contaminant could add another $1.4 million to the cost, according to Aghjayan's memo.

The 1.2-DCA was discovered in a sample taken Sept. 28 as part of regular state-mandated testing. Two tests of the sample showed 1.2-DCA at levels of 1.3 parts per billion and .91 parts per billion, both above the state- mandated safety level of .5 parts per billion.

Traces of cancer-causing chemicals were first detected in city wells in and around the Arroyo Seco in January 1980. Two wells were closed in 1985, and another two were closed this year, forcing the city to buy imported Northern California and Colorado River water from the Metropolitan Water District at a cost of more than $300,000 a year.

The first three chemicals found — trichloroethylene, carbon tetrachloride and perchloroethylene — are used as industrial solvents. They are the primary chemicals contaminating large areas of Southern California's groundwater basins.

The fourth chemical, the 1.2-DCA found in the September test, is a byproduct formed when trichloroethylene breaks down chemically as it moves through the aquifer.

It raises the cleanup costs, according to Aghjayan's memo, because it is more difficult to remove from the water than the other three pollutants.